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ABSTRACT

Clara Tree Major, the first producer to provide professional touring plays exclusively for children's audiences (from 1925 until 1954), not only produced these plays but also wrote the scripts by adapting children's stories for the theatre. This paper investigates Major's playwriting principles and techniques, examines Major's philosophy in play selection, provides an overview of all the titles chosen for presentation, and analyzes the script of "Little Women" to discover Major's use of dramatic form in her adaptations. Two tables illustrate the text: one diagrams the doubling of actors for "Toby Tyler" and the other charts the number of productions of each play title. (JM)

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THE TRAVELING PLAYS OF CLARE TREE MAJOR

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by

Michael W. Gamble

Prepared for the 1976 American Theatre Association Convention

Professional children's theatre in the United States is dominated by small touring groups of actors. These trouping performers are booked for a single afternoon or night standsin numerous cities along their established routes. The first theatre professional to conduct and sustain such tours on a national scale was Clare Tree Major (1880-1954). Indeed, Major was the first producer to provide touring plays exclusively for children's audiences. Theatre historian Nellie McCaslin declares:

> The appearance of Clare Tree Major's professional plays for children was significant for two reasons: it was the first commercial venture to meet with financial success, and it was to become the first touring company devoted exclusively to children's entertainment.

From 1925 until her death in 1954, Major was able to find audiences for her work by taking her children's theatre companies on tours of the United States and portions of Canada. Thus, from the middle of the 1920's significant numbers of children were seeing live theatre every year as a direct result of

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Major's efforts; at the height of her career she claimed a ticket sale numbering well over two million. Major offered her sponsors six productions at four-to-five week intervals during each theatrical season. The acting companies toured from October through late April and at times into the warm month of May. They were staffed by adult professional actors and at first traveled by railroad, but in later years the companies used automobiles, with settings and personal baggage being transported by truck.

The shortage of good children's plays long plagued Major. In a 1950 publication Theatre for Children, Winifred Ward indicated that the supply of children's plays had, ". . .not nearly kept pace with the demand."[2] In a publicity release Harold Sherman claimed: "Because she couldn't get competent adaptations of children's classics for the stage, Mrs. Major sat up nights and did the job herself."[3] The dearth of scripts suitable for performance by the members of her traveling companies was one reason Major turned to playwriting, or more accurately adapting children's stories for the theatre. Her extremely limited budget supplied an additional impetus because by adapting the stories herself, she was able to eliminate the expense of royalties. Thus, the purpose of this paper is to investigate the playwriting principles and techniques of Clare Tree Major as reflected in her work for her professional theatre for children. It will be devoted to Major's philosophy in play selection,

an overview of all titles chosen for presentation, and an analysis of Little Women to discover how she used the elements of dramatic form in adapting stories for children's audiences.

Philosophy

Major set forth some of her opinions concerning the purpose and requirements of children's scripts in her book Playing Theatre. She wrote that the paramount factor in writing for children is, ". . .in the educational uses made of the complete receptivity which children bring to this form of recreation."[4] It was important to her that her activity for children provide an educational or ethical outcome. In a letter to Kenneth Graham she made it clear that by education she meant socially acceptable behavior: "Cinderella teaches charity, patience, forgiveness, and a host of other useful qualities."[5] These and similar themes can be found in the stories she chose to dramatize. In her view, "Ethical values are immensely important in their influence on children,"[6] and should be considered in play selection.

The educational aspects of theatre for children as discussed by Major are accepted by children's theatre practitioners today. Moses Goldberg is of the opinion that, "The play, indeed all art, teaches indirectly--by exposing truths and ideas to the choice of the spectator."[7] In 1934 while acting as spokesman for Major, her husband John Kenderdine presented a similar view: "All we can hope for is to dramatize certain forms of conduct as desirable."[8] Nevertheless, Major

and her associates were aware of the dangers of having the pedagogical aspects of the productions become dominant. Kenderdine proclaimed: "A moral, if any, comes as a sugar coated pill. The child must not suspect in the slightest that there's a lesson in the play or that it is educational."[9] It is necessary to determine the range of stories Major chose to dramatize in order to understand the ways in which she implemented her educational ideas.

Story Selection

Early in her career, Major presented her audiences with the opportunity to aid in the selection of stories for dramatization. She later recalled: "I once gave out ten-thousand cards to children asking what plays they wanted to see. They chose twelve or fifteen. Out of those I picked stories that would make good plays."[10] The process of polling children was later modified to a ballot that was sent to the sponsoring organizations each year. The list contained approximately fifty titles, of which each group voted for six. The implication was that she took the results into consideration when planning the next season's tour. Each year the possibilities listed were well known titles from children's literature, most of which had been performed in previous seasons. Major explained: "We must have plays that the children know already--that is what they want. My two requirements in selecting productions are: Do the children know them, and are they in themselves good plays?"[11] With few exceptions she mounted only productions

of stories which would have been familiar to the parents if not to the children themselves. As she stated, "It is the only way to sell them."[12] In 1936 she told a playwriting class at Elmira College, New York:

> Don't send us your original plays. . .we won't be able to use them. Every year we send out a list of twenty possibilities for next season, but the top six are old favorites. Parents won't buy tickets for plays with which they are not familiar.[13]

Ward agreed that the appeal of the familiar story was an important element in audience development:

> The familiar story has a strong appeal to children and so they flock to see their favorites come to life. Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs which fascintated them at seven years, draws them to the theatre at eleven. . . .Heidi is a tale which can be counted on to fill a house. So is Hans Brinker, Rip Van Winkle, Tom Sawyer, and The Secret Garden.[14]

With the exception of the Twain story, each of Ward's examples was produced frequently by Major.

Another equally important factor in Major's selection process was the attempt to have a five year interval between productions of any one script. The notable exception was Peter Pan which was toured four times in the last ten years of her operation. However, the system of repeating a play every sixth year was firmly established by 1940. For example, the 1935 and 1940 seasons were nearly identical. In 1935 Alice in Wonderland, Robin Hood, Hans Brinker, Heidi, The Secret Garden, and Beauty and the Beast toured. The 1940 bill was identical with the substitution of The Seven Wishes by Maurice

Maeterlinck for Beauty and the Beast.

By selling a subscription of six plays each year, Major faced an inherent problem in play selection which to this day must be resolved by children's theatre producers. Children of all ages attended performances of all the plays, regardless of the cognitive and emotional or intellectual level of the material. Therefore, Sleeping Beauty would have older children in attendance, and Little Women would be patronized by children far too young to fully comprehend the concepts in the story. In commenting on the problem, Ward explained:

> The wide range in the ages of children's theatre audiences offers one of the greatest problems in the choosing of plays. What is comprehensible to the five year old is infantile to the child of eleven. What brings a thrill to the latter terrifies the first grader.[15]

She suggests a differentiation in age range for various plays, and not admitting children not within that range. The solution was not available to Major partly because of monetary considerations. It was necessary to fill auditoriums with children of all ages in order to show a profit and continue operation.

Cast size also affected play selection. Nearly all of the scripts used by Major required that most actors perform multiple roles during the play. Most stories were adapted for performance by seven or eight actors, although a few plays used as many as twelve. Major carefully plotted precisely which parts each performer would have to portray in each scene. Table 1 shows doubles required for Toby Tyler as it was toured during the 1949 and 1954 seasons.

TABLE 1

DOUBLES CHART FOR

TOBY TYLER

Performer	Act I	Act II	Act III	Act IV
1	Lord	Lord		Andre
2	Toby	Toby	Toby	Toby
3	Clown Castle	Clown	Clown Castle	Castle Clown
4	Giant	Sam	Sam	Sam
5	Lily	Lily	Lily	Lily
6	Acrobat	Ella	Ella	Rene Ella
7	Ben	Ben Mr. Barker	Ben	Towser

Stories Dramatized by Major: An Overview

During her career Major mounted a total of sixty stories for child audiences. All of the stories were adapted for the stage by Major herself with the exception of Peter Pan, The Seven Wishes, and The Golden Apple which were already im play form. Forty-four, or over seventy percent of the plays had been written by the Fall of 1934, leaving less than thirty percent of the titles to be written between 1935 and 1954. With the pattern of repetition used by Major, many of the plays dramatized in the 1920's were still being produced in the early 1950's.

Play Categories

The stories Major selected to dramatize can be divided into two general categories: (1) fantasies for younger children, and (2) novels and histories for older children. The fantasies included such tales as Cinderella, Old King Cole, Aladdin, and Sleeping Beauty. The older children's literature included such novels as Little Women, Little Men, The Secret Garden, Under the Lilacs, and Nobody's Boy. Histories included Marco Polo and two Indian stories, Pocahontas, and The Iroquois Captive. Other well known titles such as Alice in Wonderland are not easily categorized. Table 2 shows the titles and number of productions of each of the plays presented during Major's career.

TABLE 2

Number of Productions of Each Play Title

9	6	5	4
Cinderella Hans Brinker	Aladdin King of the Golden River Little Women Snow White	Pinocchio Robin Hood Mrs. Wiggs Toby Tyler Peter Pan Alice in Wonderland	Beauty and the Beast Heidi The Prince's Secret Five Little Peppers Under the Lilacs
3	**2**	**1**	
The Snow Queen Little Men Hansel and Gretel Sara Crewe Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm Rip Van Winkle Pocahontas Old King Cole The Secret Garden	The Golden Apple Master Skylark Nuremburg Stove Poor Little Rich Girl Penrod Captive Maid Dick Whittington	King of Camarand The Wizard of Oz Water Babies Treasure Island Feast of Lanterns Maid of the Nile The Painted Pig Huckleberry Finn Curdie, the Princess, and the Goblin Old Fashioned Girl Nobody's Girl Nobody's Boy Daddy Long Legs The Seven Wishes Marco Polo The Rebellious Prince	King Midas Puss in Boots Chinese Nightingale Mother Goose's Garden Pinkie and the Fairies Prince and the Pauper Rumplestiltskin The Silver Thread Little Princess Mrs. Moonlight Treasure Island

Little Women

The remainder of this paper will be devoted to discussing one of Major's most popular and most produced plays--Little Women. Research has demonstrated that this particular play is representative of Major's treatment of classic children's literature. A consideration of this or any other of Major's playscripts is impossible without considering the production needs and problems of Major's small companies. She was writing for a cast that averaged eight performers who were traveling in an automobile and only one truck. In these two vehicles they stored the scenery, costumes, props, and their personal belongings. It was common to set up the scenery in an hour or less on stages that varied greatly in size and available lighting equipment. Her limited production capabilities will be discussed as they related to the play since it was constructed specifically for these conditions. Only by considering the technical limitations under which Major adapted the story can valid conclusions be drawn as to its worth as literature for children's theatre.

Louisa May Alcott began her novel Little Women with the following excerpt from John Bunyan's "Pilgrim's Progress":

> Tell them of Mercy: she is one
> Who early hath her pilgrimage begun.
> Yea, let young damsels learn of her to prize
> The world which is to come, and so be wise;
> For little tripping maids may follow God
> Along the ways which saintly feet have trod.

Alcott reveals four young girls who see themselves as pilgrims making their way through a portion of their lives. As they progress toward maturity they find that hard work and consideration for others are rewarded. As in many of the novels Major chose to dramatize for older children during the 1930's, poverty is the chief source of the crisis in the story. Reverend March, the girls' father, is serving as a Chaplain in Civil War hospitals that surround Washington, D.C. His wife and four daughters have been left to cope with ever present poverty. The play begins with the first chapter of the novel in which the girls are complaining that, "Christmas won't be Christmas without any presents."[17] The lives of the girls are chronicled much like they are in the novel; however, at the point where Alcott has Beth recover from Scarlet Fever, Major ends her version.

Alcott used much dialogue in the novel, and as was often her practice when adapting stories Major simply lifted the dialogue from the specific chapters that she selected to use in her play. With only minor exceptions the outline of the book became the organization of the play. It was developed by taking the dialogue from each chapter and placing it into dramatic form. The only important omission that might have helped give the play additional unity was Alcott's repeated references to "Pilgrim's Progress". In the book, the girls' mother tells them: "Look under your pillows Christmas morning and you'll find your guide book,"[18] meaning copies

of the Bunyan poem. The image of the girls making their way through the hardships of life--many of which we see in the play--is lost by Major's omission. The plot tends to deteriorate into a series of unrelated episodes in the lives of the girls. There is a need for a unifying thread that reference to Bunyan's work might have provided.

Four characters--Jo, Beth, Meg, and Amy--dominate the plot of Little Women. Alcott devoted a chapter to each of the girls to introduce them to the reader. In this way each becomes an individual in her own right, as well as a character in the story. For example, Beth was described in the following manner:

> Beth was too bashful to go to school; it had been tried, but she suffered so much that it was given up, and she did her lessons at home with her father. Even when he went away and her mother was called to devoted her skill and energy to the soldier's aid societies, Beth went on faithfully by herself and did the best she could. She was a housewifely little creature and helped Hannah keep home neat and comfortable for the workers, never thinking of any reward but to be loved.[19]

Alcott described each of the girls in detail. However, when the descriptive passages were eliminated by Major, much of the detail of the characterizations was lost. In addition Major altered Alcott's characters by the dialogue she chose to omit. For example, the following insight into Jo's character was not incorporated into the play:

> Jo put her hands in her pocket and began to whistle. She was immediately chided by her sister Amy:

"Don't Jo; it's so boyish!"
"That's why I do it."
"I detest rude, unladylike girls!"
"I hate affected, niminy-piminy chits."[20]

The deletion of the passage causes the play to lose some of the tomboyish side of Jo's character. It is possible that in production under Major's direction the four characters were carefully created to become more fully developed individuals. The goals of the characters are not entirely clear--resulting in part from the original story. Because the plot is a series of incidents Christmas presents, delivering food to an indigent family, preparing for a party, etc.--the girls do not seem to have a definite aim or goal. Collectively, they want their father to come home from the war, but since there is little they can do to hasten his return, their goals seem as diffuse as the plot.

The relationships in the play are clearly developed. A true feeling of warmth exists between the members of the family which extends to their wealthy neighbors, Laurie and his grandfather. The conflict results from an outside force--the war--and the illnesses of Beth and Reverend March. In each case the group acts as a harmonious unit in its fight against adversity. Each of the characters is sympathetic. Only Aunt March creates conflict and then not until the final scene when she refuses to accetp that the oldest sister Meg and Brooke, a tutor, are in love and wish to be married.

Most of the dialogue in the play was taken from the novel. In order to examine Major's techniques, the opening passages of both the play and the book follow:

> "Christmas won't be Christmas, without any presents," grumbled Jo, lying on the rug.
>
> "It's so dreadful to be poor!" sighed Meg, looking down at her old dress.
>
> "I don't think it's fair for some girls to have plenty of pretty things and other girls nothing at all," added little Amy, with an injured sniff.
>
> "We've got father and mother and each other," said Beth contentedly, from her corner.
>
> The four young faces on which the firelight shone brightened at the cheerful words, but darkened again as Jo said sadly, "We haven't got father, and shall not have him for a long time." She didn't say "perhaps never", but each silently added it, thinking of father far away where the fighting was.
>
> Nobody spoke for a minute; then Meg said in an altered tone, "You know the reason mother proposed not having any presents this Christmas was because it is going to be a hard winter for everyone, and she thinks we ought not to spend money for pleasure when our men are suffering so in the army. We can't do much, but we can make our little sacrifices and ought to do it gladly. But I'm afraid I don't," Meg shook her head as she thought regretfully of all the pretty things she wanted.
>
> "But I don't think the little we would spend would do any good. We've each got a dollar, and the army wouldn't be helped by our giving that. I agree not to expect anything from mother or you, but I do want to buy Undine and Sintram for myself; I've wanted it so long," said Jo who was a bookworm.
>
> "I have planned to spend mine in new music," said Beth, with a little sigh, which no one heard but the hearth brush and kettle holder.
>
> "I shall get a nice box of Faber's drawing pencils; I really need them," said Amy decidedly.[21]

The following passage is Major's adaptation of the above selection:

JO
(Grumbles) Christmas won't be Christmas without any presents.

MEG
It's dreadful to be poor.

AMY
I don't think it's fair for some girls to have plenty of pretty things, and others nothing at all.

BETH
(Happily) We've got father, and mother, and each other.

JO
(Quietly) We haven't got father--and shan't have till the war is over.

MEG
(More brightly) Mother wants us to give up our presents only because our men are suffering so in the army. We should be glad to make such a small sacrifice for them.

JO
But we have only a dollar each. That wouldn't help the men in the army much if we did give it to them. I don't mind not getting anything from anyone else, but I did want to buy Undine and Sintram for myself.

BETH
I meant to buy some new music.

AMY
Well, I shall buy some drawing pencils. I need them.[22]

It should be noted that the descriptive passages such as, ". . .grumbled Jo, lying on the rug," have been deleted and replaced by the stage direction to the actress, "Grumbles". She is to show the attitude called for in the original novel.

The dialogue itself has been altered slightly by Major. Meg's line, "Mother wants us to give up our

presents. . ." has been considerably shortened. The grammatical construction is simplified and the meaning is more definite and positive in tone. The term "proposed" is replaced by the phrase "wants us to". The dialogue is more straight forward and less circular in nature in the Major adaptation. She has changed the dialogue from narrative style to dramatic discourse, which makes it more conversational in tone. Alcott had Meg tell her sisters, "I have planned to spend mine in new music." Major changed "have planned to spend" into "mean to buy." The substitution gives the dialogue a more active and positive verb construction making it more dynamic in nature.

At times dialogue retained by Major becomes extremely long for a children's audience. When the mother (Marmee) enters, she brings a letter which has just arrived from Reverend March. She reads the entire letter to the girls:

> Give them my dear love and a kiss. Tell them I think of them by day and pray for them at night and find my best comfort in their affection at all times. A year seems very long to wait before I see them, but remind them that while we wait we may all work so that the hard days are not wasted. I know they will remember all I said to them, that they will be loving children to you, will do their duty faithfully, fight their bosom enemies bravely, and conquer themselves so beautifully that when I come back to them I may be fonder and prouder than ever of my little women.[23]

The letter, taken from the book, is too long for a children's play. It is too lengthy for child audiences to comprehend.

Major incorporated two short dances and a song into her dramatization. During the second act the girls are preparing to go to a party. Laurie and his tutor Mr. Brooke arrive. The young people practice dancing polkas that will be danced that evening. Later the refrain from "Here Comes the Bride" is interpolated into the story after Meg has agreed to marry Brooke. The entire cast encircles the pair and sings as the curtain falls. The use of the song helps end the play on a high lively note in keeping with the spirit developed throughout.

Conclusion

Clare Tree Major's adaptations of stories for children reflect the touring conditions under which her companies operated. Casts were small and only one truck was available to each play to carry scenery, costumes, and baggage. Major's treatment of Little Women is illustrative of her approach to playwriting. This and other scripts show her as a responsible adaptor of a long book containing considerable dialogue which could be modified for use on the stage. The plot of Major's Little Women is well developed and interesting throughout. However, an important limitation is the Alcott story itself. Its diffused, sentimental tone may make it unacceptable to today's child audiences.

It is significant that in 1948, toward the end of her career, Major told Lewis Nichols of the New York Times that,

"Taste, pure taste, has not changed in the last twenty-five years."[24] It was upon this hypothesis that Major had based her children's theatre operation. From her viewpoint what had been good children's theatre in 1923 was still the best approach nearly a quarter of a century later. This belief may well have contributed to Major's decline in the early 1950's. However, even with her limitations as a writer of children's plays, Clare Tree Major pioneered professional theatre for children and brought it to a high level of national recognition.

Footnotes

[1]Nellie McCaslin, Theatre for Children in the United States: A History (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1971), p.75.

[2]Winifred Ward, Theatre for Children (Anchorage Kentucky: The Children's Theatre Press, 1950), p.60.

[3]Harold Sherman, "Clare Tree Major", unpublished manuscript, Theatre Collection, New York Public Library at Lincoln Center, Clare Tree Major Scrapbooks, MWEZ 15,641.

[4]Clare Tree Major, Playing Theatre (London: Oxford University Press, 1930), p.253.

[5]Kenneth Graham, "An Introductory Study of Evaluation of Plays for Children's Theatre in the United States" (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Utah, 1947), p.100.

[6]Ibid.

[7]Moses Goldberg, Children's Theatre: A Philosophy and a Method (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1974), p.15.

[8]Pittsburg Press, October 1934.

[9]Ibid.

[10]New York Times, 24 April 1934.

[11]Ibid.

[12]Ibid.

[13]The Sunday Telegram, Elmira, New York, 17 May 1936.

[14]Ward, Theatre for Children, p.124.

[15]Ibid., p.119.

[16]Louisa May Alcott, Little Women or Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy (Boston: Little Brown and Company, 1968) p. vi.

[17]Ibid., p. 3.

[18]Ibid., p. 12.

[19]Ibid., p. 36.

[20]Ibid., p. 4.

[21]Ibid., p. 3.

[22]Clare Tree Major, Little Women, unpublished MS courtesy of Marion DePew Ostrander, Costume Designer for the Clare Tree Major Children's Theatre, Pleasantville, New York, p.1.

[23]Ibid., p. 9.

[24]Lewis Nichols, "Major for Minors", New York Times, 7 March 1948.